Review of: Alexander Nagel. The Controversy of Renaissance Art. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011

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Alexander Nagel. *The Controversy of Renaissance Art.*
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. xi + 358 pp. $60. ISBN: 978–0–226–56772–3.

This lucidly written and well-argued book "disregards the High Renaissance/Mannerism distinction, presenting instead the first half of the sixteenth century as an experimental period in the spheres of both art and religion" (2). While the Reformation debate on images in Northern Europe led to outbursts of iconoclasm, the arts in Italy were "in a state of controversy," meaning that "unresolved impulses were at work inside them" and artists tried to respond to such "Reformation questions" as: "What is an image? What role, if any, should images play in religion? Does Christian art merely present pagan figures in new guise?" (2–3). The author traces this controversy in three parts. In the first part, "Excavations in Christian Art," he discusses contemporary examples of criticism of late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century religious art, cases of artists experimenting with new solutions, and the importance of early Christian art as point of reverification. The second part contains a study of images of Christ, in which the author explores the boundaries between statues and idols. Again, early Christian examples come out as an important point of reference. In the third part, "Soft Iconoclasm," the author studies the emergence of sacrament tabernacles with the Eucharist "as an alternative to images, and as a key to a compromise between extreme reformist positions and ecclesiastical traditions" (204–05). The connecting thread to emerge from the various phenomena discussed in these three parts is "a repeated preoccupation with restoring a Christocentric focus in Christian art" (206).

Dealing with debates and controversy, the author considers the Renaissance as a period that is different from "the triumphant epoch imagined both by its earlier champions and by its disciplinary foes" (2). Unfortunately, it is hard to get an idea of how typical the individual cases studied in the book are for the epoch of the Renaissance. Focusing on individual artists and patrons struggling with Reformation questions, Nagel ignores the broader picture of the Italian Renaissance, which also comprises works that by their very nature did not offer room for debate or experiments, such as large propagandistic projects (secular and religious) and official, Church-commissioned artworks meant to teach the orthodox view. Moreover, the author focuses on reconstructing the intentions of the artists and their patrons, but gives hardly any indication if these intentions were indeed understood and shared by contemporary observers (which would, admittedly, be difficult to demonstrate). But if we are to believe Vasari, for example, Fra Bartolommeo's lost *St Sebastian* in S. Marco, Florence (still known through

a copy in S. Francesco, Fiesole) evoked reactions from the local women that are worlds apart from such intentions as reconstructed by Nagel in the case of the Fra's comparable *Salvator Mundi* (89–94). Similarly, Nagel's discussion of Filippino Lippi's *Miracle of St Philip* in the Strozzi chapel (S. Maria Novella, Florence) has ingenious observations on the (possible) implications of the fact that the Mars statue in the painting is rendered as a multicolored and therefore seemingly living person. Although Nagel asserts that "it can be assumed" that its patron and "any Florentine at the time" (118) would have been aware of its many allusions, especially to the relic of St Philip's arm, I seriously doubt if contemporary observers would see the painting through such typical modern iconographer's eyes. Would informed visitors not rather have seen it as a Strozzi attempt to outdo Filippino's *Laocoön* painting in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano? The paintings show obvious similarities in both form and content.

To me, part 3 of the book seems the most convincing. On page 206, the author lists a number of cases, spread over Italy, where sacrament tabernacles with the Eucharist were put on the high altar, demonstrating that soft iconoclasm was not an incidental phenomenon. In the case of Gianmatteo Giberti, he is able to show how this bishop of Verona tried to introduce sacrament tabernacles in all the churches of his diocese (239), but also that his "interventions were largely misunderstood at their time" (254). The final chapter, on the marble altar in Vicenza cathedral, is a fascinating demonstration of how current ideas about the Eucharist as an alternative to images were put into practice.

One may not always agree with Nagel's suggestions, but one cannot deny that his beautifully produced book is full of thought-provoking views that will stimulate its readers to rethink their ideas about Reformation questions in Italian Renaissance art.

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